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TAGS: [OVIP](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [ECON](#) [CONS](#) [EI](#)  
SUBJECT: CODEL LEAHY TALKS NORTHERN IRELAND, IMMIGRATION,  
AND SUB-PRIME WITH SENIOR IRISH OFFICIALS

Classified By: Amb. Thomas Foley. Reasons 1.4 (b/d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Senators Patrick Leahy, Thad Cochran, and Richard Shelby visited Ireland May 24-27, 2008, meeting Irish Prime Minister (Taoiseach) Brian Cowen, Finance Minister Brian Lenihan, Foreign Minister Micheal Martin, and President Mary McAleese. Headlining the Irish agenda was to say "thank you" for U.S. support of the Northern Ireland peace process and in promoting economic development and investment in Ireland. Each Irish official raised concern about the fate of Irish citizens living illegally in the U.S. Senator Leahy made a commitment to the Irish leaders to try to resolve this immigration issue on his return to Washington. Senator Leahy briefly participated in the international cluster munitions conference ongoing in Dublin. This cable reports only on meetings attended by EMBOFFs. End summary.

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Meeting with the Prime Minister  
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¶2. (C) Prime Minister Cowen thanked Senator Leahy for U.S. support of Ireland over the years, especially in the Northern Ireland peace process and in promoting economic development and investment in Ireland. Cowen stressed he is firmly committed to ensuring that Ireland's excellent bilateral relations with the U.S. remain undiminished even as the hook of the Northern Ireland peace process becomes less important in the future. He also indicated that the Irish Government would remain vigilant in its efforts to assist the Irish Diaspora, singling out his particular concern for the plight of the Irish living illegally in the U.S. Leahy committed himself to the Prime Minister to look into a special bilateral visa program for the Irish ) this year if possible. He said that he would meet soon with Irish Ambassador Michael Collins to discuss this issue.

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Meeting with the Finance Minister  
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¶3. (C) Senators Cochran and Shelby met with the new Finance Minister Brian Lenihan, who assured the Senators that Irish banks have virtually no exposure to sub-prime mortgages and that banks appear sound. Lenihan noted that some Irish financial institutions had tried to set up such operations but the effort "did not amount to much." Lenihan said that he was under some pressure to "fix" Ireland's struggling housing sector but stated that he was not prepared to make any "drastic change."

¶4. (SBU) Lenihan said he will prepare a tough budget this year given the slowdown in the Irish economy. Michael McGrath, Assistant Secretary of the Budget and Economic Division, said that the housing downturn will shave 3 to 3.5 percent off of GDP growth this year. (Note: The consensus forecast for Irish GDP growth in 2008 is approximately 3 percent. End Note.) McGrath added, however, that the underlying fundamentals of the economy were very strong and he expected a pickup in growth next year and beyond.

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Meeting with the Foreign Minister  
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15. (C) Foreign Minister Martin went out of his way to squeeze a late-evening meeting into his schedule between two overseas trips. During the discussion, Martin stressed that the Irish Government was firmly committed to economic growth in the North and North-South cooperation to ensure that Northern Ireland remains peaceful. He thanked the Senators for U.S. support of the peace process, including the recent investment conference in Belfast. Martin also raised his concern about the Irish living illegally in the U.S. As he did with the Prime Minister, Leahy committed himself to helping resolve Irish immigration concerns.

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Cluster Munitions  
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16. (U) Senator Leahy participated in the ongoing international cluster munitions conference, meeting with cluster munitions survivors and participating in a panel discussion titled &United States and Cluster Munitions.8 Other panelists were Lord Alf Dubs, Ken Rutherford, and Steve Goose. The panel discussion was open to conference delegates, NGOs, and media representatives. EMBOFFs did not participate in the cluster munitions conference events.

17. (U) CODEL Leahy has cleared on this cable.  
FOLEY